

Author: Manuela Palacios

ORCID Code: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7470-441X>

Title: Inside the Whale: Configurations of An-other Female Subjectivity

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Abstract

The posthumanist paradigm of the last three decades has brought about a transformation in what we understand as “human”, and its postanthropocentric proposals —common to posthumanist and ecocritical debates— have called for a radical revision of the relationship between culture and nature and have fostered bonds of continuity between these (Braidotti and Dolphijn). The current article focuses on the relationship of continuity between humans and animals in contemporary Irish and Galician poetry, and in particular on the motif of the whale, in that such continuity illustrates the emergent configurations of female subjectivity produced in these two Atlantic communities of Western Europe since the 1990s.

Affiliation: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela; Departamento de Filoloxía Inglesa e Alemá; Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

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1. Introduction

The posthumanist paradigm of the last three decades has brought about a transformation of what we understand as “human” (Braidotti *The Posthuman*) with its postanthropocentric proposals, common to posthumanist and ecocritical debates, calling for a radical revision of the relationship between culture and nature, one which repudiates patterns of human domination over nature and instead fosters bonds of continuity between them (Braidotti and Dolphijn). Meanwhile, ecofeminist denunciations of androcentrism have revealed the patriarchal interests behind the common exploitation and subordination of women and nature, and have put forward alternative ideological approaches ranging from spiritual to materialist propositions, from hallowed identifications of women and nature to the critical scrutiny of social constructions of gender and nature (Diamond and Orenstein xi; Gaard and Murphy 3-5).

In this article I will focus on the relationship of contiguity between humans and animals in contemporary Irish and Galician (north-western Spain) poetry, and in particular on the motif of the whale. Such contiguity illustrates the emergent configurations of female subjectivity produced in these two Atlantic communities of Western Europe since the 1990s.¹ I will argue that contemporary literary configurations of human-animal contiguity generate notions of hybridity that differ substantially from the hybrid creatures of classical mythology which, according to Ferreira (43), functioned as cautionary tales to exemplify punishments and to warn of dangers. In Irish and Galician poetry over the last three decades whales have featured frequently as a point of fascination for the human observer. More specifically, a significant number of female voices have expressed the desire to dwell inside the whale. These instances of hybridity and contiguity not only open

up new perspectives on the interrelation between humans and animals but also raise pressing questions about our relationship with alterity. P.D. Murphy has argued that the rapport between humans and nature should not be based on an alienating radical difference, but on a relative difference that allows for mutual and respectful communication, a rapport not with an *Other* but with *an-other*: “relational difference and *anotherness* rather than Otherness” (35). In line with Murphy’s proposal, I aim to show that contemporary uses of the motif of the whale advocate configurations of an-other female subjectivity and an-other liaison between woman and nature.

The conspicuous presence of whales in Irish and Galician literature may well be connected to the contact that these coastal countries have had with this marine mammal. Although a broad variety of cetaceans exist, I will use “whale” as a generic term here, because it is the most commonly occurring term in the literary texts under analysis. Apart from a wide array of economic, social and cultural characteristics shared by Ireland and Galicia —such as an alleged Celtic background, the agrarian economy, the postcolonial import of debates about national identity and the vernacular language, the impact of the Catholic moral code on all aspects of life, and the unprecedented rise of women writers since the 1990s, among others— both of these countries had a whaling industry, reaching a peak in the twentieth century, which entailed hunting, cutting and processing the products derived from these animals. In Galicia, whale hunting goes back to the Middle Ages, while in Ireland whale products were mainly obtained from beached cetaceans until a nascent whaling industry was established in Donegal Bay in the eighteenth century. However, it was on the coast of County Mayo that a more robust whaling industry developed in the twentieth century (Ireland.net). The Irish

government declared its territorial waters as a sanctuary for whales and dolphins in 1991, the first declaration of its kind in Europe (iwdg.ie). As for the Galician whaling industry, it had factories in the provinces of Lugo, A Coruña and Pontevedra, some of which were active until 1986 —the year of the commercial whaling moratorium declared by the International Whaling Commission. Besides their meat, other products obtained from cetaceans in Galicia included oil, lubricants, margarine and fertilizers (Axena.org).

2. The Whale in Galician Poetry: Self-Affirmation and Vulnerability

Although the poetry under discussion in this article was published after the 1986 commercial whaling moratorium, the motif of the whale is a potent one due both to the impact of the whaling industry on the population of the Galician coast and to the growing international awareness of the danger of extinction of some species. The conspicuous rise of women writers in this period will also allow us to ascertain whether there is a differentiated use of the motif of the whale by male and female poets, as well as to consider the repercussions of this motif more broadly in the literary field.

The whale has a compelling allegorical dimension in the titles of several poetry collections since the 1980s: *Baleas e baleas* [Whales and whales] (Castro 1988), *A rota dos baleeiros* [The whalers' route] (Alonso, Souto and Villar 1991), *A tribo das baleas. Poetas de arestora* [The tribe of whales. Poets of these times] (González 2001), *Balea2* [Whale2] (Creus 2011), *Carne de Leviatán* [Flesh of Leviathan] (Pato 2013), *no ventre da balea* [In the whale's belly] (Villar 2004). In spite of the salient position of the motif of the whale in the titles of these collections, it only features occasionally in the poems themselves —except in Creus's *Balea2*—, although it does so with outstanding symbolical value. The motif

in the title acquires an allegorical dimension that relates the whale with the book as a whole and generates a marine imaginary of magnitude, potency, struggle and survival. In other collections, the motif of the whale is not part of the title, but features significantly in several poems: *Arden* [Burn] (Romaní 1998), e *Estremas* [Boundaries] (Romaní 2010). Lastly, other collections contain just an occasional, though forceful, use of the motif: *Elexías a Lola* [Elegies to Lola] (Torres 1980, 2016), *Poemas da cidade oculta* [Poems of the hidden city] (Creus 1996), *Calendario perpetuo* [Perpetual calendar] (Álvarez Cáccamo 1997), *(nós, as inadaptadas)* [(us, the maladjusted)] (María do Cebreiro 2002), and *Desescribindo* [Unwriting] (Aleixandre 2016).

The “monstrosity” of the marine mammal has been identified as an appropriate trope for the empowerment of Galician women writers, who are now seen as irrepressible navigators and explorers of new feminine subjectivities (González *Elas* 143). However, even though these notions of mobility and strength seem empowering enough, there may be some objections to this feminist appropriation of the trope at a time of decimation of the whale. Are we constructing a new female subjectivity at the cost of, or with little regard for, the precarious situation of the animal itself? Can the endangered whale really serve as the suitable figuration for an ecofeminist self-affirmation of women when, as Ynestra King has claimed, nature should be the central category of ecofeminist analysis?

In ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis. An analysis of the interrelated dominations of nature —psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and nonhuman nature— and the historic position of women in relation to those forms of domination is the starting point of ecofeminist theory. (117)

On the concept of monstrosity —used by González (*Elas* 143) and Román (*Arden* 14) in reference to the whale— Jeffrey J. Cohen has made the following observations: the monster is the extreme version of marginalization, the embodiment of difference and an obstinate Other that we need to domesticate, although we cannot do so. It provokes repulsion and attraction, anxiety and desire, arousing the pleasures of the body and drawing us into worlds of fantasy free of social norms. Cohen suggests that we can construe cultures from the monsters they produce, and concludes that monsters are cultural products themselves, ones that destabilize what we understand as human and thereby compel us to reassess our sense of difference. Regarding the whale as monster in contemporary Galician poetry, it is certainly a sign of difference and a stimulus for us to reconsider our relationship with alterity, the abject Other, corporeality and repressed desire. However, while Cohen argues that the monster is exclusively a cultural product, I would like to highlight the fact that the whale is both a natural creature and a sign that we interpret through a cultural code. If we circumscribe the whale, or any other natural being, exclusively within our cultural constructions, we will not be able to understand its difference, respect its autonomy, take heed of its needs, listen to its own voice and learn from the knowledge that it imparts. Ecocritic Sue Ellen Campbell maintains that it is not just the human being that formulates the signification of nature, since nature is also one of the external forces that shape us. Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles refers to “constrained constructivism” as the acknowledgement of the limitations that nature poses to each of our epistemological acts. Furthermore, in line with Patrick D. Murphy’s (5) understanding of the relative difference of nature, an ecofeminist approach to the trope of the whale would be expected to respect the whale’s alterity while

defending its equal ontological status and rights. A postanthropocentric outlook on the relation of contiguity between woman and animal, and on the woman's choice of the whale in her search for a hospitable space inside the animal, also reveals instances of hybridity that are characteristic of posthumanist discourses.

In her collection *Baleas e baleas*, Galician poet Luisa Castro gives a voice to the alienating experience of Galician seamen fishing off the coast of Ireland. Hard and unjust labor conditions, illegal fishing practices, sexual frustration and alcoholism engender the array of tales, fantasies and laments of a lineage of seamen that are found throughout the book. The second section of the collection, entitled "Os ventres das baleas" [The whales' bellies], contains one poem in particular that intertwines a grandfather's tales about whales that hide whole continents in their bellies with a female adolescent's rebellion against such male heroic narratives told by discredited fishermen. Among the options that the young protagonist has before her are the following: either to resort to the trope of the whale that devours plundering ships, or to identify with the whale within a common perception of vulnerability. The former motif, which González (*Elas* 146) has defined as the "satanic whale", would correspond to a feminist appropriation of the patriarchal demonization of resistance as a means of turning it into a tool of female empowerment. In the 1992 edition of this poem, the young protagonist waits inside the belly of the devouring whale in an act of self-defense against the fishermen who ingenuously take the whale to be an island: "no ventre das baleas só resido eu / agardando a hora / de que atraquen os barcos" [in the whales' bellies I'm the only dweller / waiting for the hour / when the ships will moor] (52-53). However, the first edition of this collection, from 1988, does not convey a desire for struggle or revenge, but rather the exposure of the protagonist's vulnerability: "no ventre das

baleas só residu eu / con moitas cicatrices nos xionllos / de caer na cuberta cando amarran os barcos” [in the whales’ bellies I’m the only dweller / with many scars on my knees / after falling on the deck of the mooring ships] (45). The trope of the wounded female body abounds in contemporary Galician poetry as an acknowledgement of vulnerability, and recalls Judith Butler’s (100) warning about the fallacy of the sovereign subject and her proposal of contingency and ontological instability as an ethical resource that allows us to establish ties of reciprocity with the Other. A reading of Castro’s poem as an inquiry into notions of interdependence and reciprocity between the young woman and the whale seems to concur with postanthropocentric and ecofeminist strategies that attempt to harmonize the rights of women and animals and denounce patriarchal narratives of pillage.

In her analysis of women poets’ synecdoche of the whale’s belly, Helena González (*Elas* 147) suggests that it is a privileged locus for the generation of utopian discourse and identifies in the whale’s corporeality a trope for women’s empowerment. A similar idea can be found in another Galician writer, Xohana Torres: “Unha muller pode converterse en balea polo simple feito de querer cambiar de forma” [A woman can turn into a whale for the sake of wanting to change her shape] (17). Nevertheless, in Ana Romaní’s collection *Estremas* an epigraph with the following quotation by Rosi Braidotti draws the limits of the utopian project: “As mulleres que anceian o cambio non poden mudar a súa pel como se fosen serpes” [Women who yearn for change cannot shed their skin as if they were snakes] (43). On the other hand, a poem such as the one that begins “No medio da praza / despezan os restos da balea” [In the middle of the square / they cut the remains of the whale] from Romaní’s collection *Arden* (13) cannot be reduced to a utopian understanding of the trope of the whale, since this would imply

overlooking the responsibility of the Galician whaling industry for the extinction of several species of cetaceans. It seems paradoxical that the dissected whale can be seen as a sign of feminist self-affirmation, although the young bystander certainly identifies with the whale: “A balea non ten aletas! Mírase unha nena” [The whale has no fins! A girl regards herself] (13). Could women’s empowerment ever go hand in hand with the extinction of the whale?: “a cría que nunca fecundou o espólio” [the offspring that plunder never inseminated] (13). I would like to suggest an alternative reading of this poem with a focus on female and animal vulnerability. Romaní does not conceal the whale’s vulnerability —“a vaña do pánico” [the pod of panic], “confundiú” [confused], “regresión” [regression], “vista débil” [weak eyesight] “espanto” [fright]— and for this reason I advocate an interpretation of the poem that acknowledges androcentric decimation of cetaceans and shows the empathy of both the writer and the female character towards the whale. This whale is a sign of relative difference or an-otherness, because the girl recognizes herself in it: “Por onde navegou mamífera a arqueoloxía da sombra? / A rapaza sorri: // ‘Por min mesma señores por min mesma’” [Where has the mammal sailed, this archeology of shade? / The girl smiles: // ‘Through myself gentlemen through myself’] (13).

Relative difference allows for spaces of communication, liminal zones of transition and contact, and these are also explored by Romaní in another collection, *Estremas*, which depicts the haunting Egyptian desert of Wadi Al-Hitan [Whale Valley] and its fossil Archaeoceti in their evolution from land-based animals to ocean-going cetaceans. It is this spatial and evolutionary liminality that challenges boundaries: “Un ventre ensimesmado de osamentas / esculca a furia / debanda extremas” [A self-absorbed belly of bones / scans the fury / unravels boundaries]

(9). Metamorphosis is also a privileged topic in Marilar Aleixandre's poetry. Trained as a biologist, this Galician poet identifies the woman writer, always a stranger and always out of place, with the mammal that abandons the trite routes on land and enters the sea: "... rexeitada polos cuadrúpedes / esqueiroada da touza de peixes" [rejected by quadrupeds / shunned by the shoal of fish] (19). As the title of Aleixandre's collection implies —*Desescribindo* [Unwriting]—, only through this process of estrangement and transgression of boundaries will the woman writer learn to un-write poetry.

The references to the whales' bellies in Castro, María do Cebreiro and Romaní (*Estremas*), are by necessity related to the motif of devouring, feeding, nourishing and starving. This is of particular interest in light of the attention paid by women writers since the 1980s to the subject of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, and it evinces a divergent approach from that found in traditional narratives like the story of Jonah in the *Bible* or the traditional tale of *Pinocchio*. In Castro's *Baleas e baleas*, the grandfather tells the story of the lurking whale which swallows the unsuspecting fishermen, while in contradistinction the rebellious adolescent woman refuses to eat: "dilles que non quero máis, que teño abondo / que son fermosa así" [tell them I don't want any more, that I've had enough / that I am beautiful like this] (70). In María do Cebreiro's collection (*nós, as inadaptadas*) schoolgirls learn patriarchal narratives that bundle woman and whale together as the abject Other: "Qué falta de decoro, agora si, comparar a nosa efixie diminuta co ventre das baleas" [What a lack of decorum, indeed, to compare our minute effigy to the whales' bellies] (39). Unsurprisingly, one of the girls "morreu delgadiña" [died skinny] (39), and looked as if she had "unha solitaria na barriga" [a tapeworm in her belly] (41). Chus Pato's *Carne de Leviatán* is indebted to the figuration of the

Leviathan in Jewish mythology that is served at a banquet. Pato's Leviathan is similarly served to women artists to endow them with the capacity to create new shapes and forms.

The hunt of the whale is liable to bring about an epic imaginary of male heroism, and the question thus rises as to how contemporary male writers make use of this motif (González *Elas* 162). The collection *A rota dos baleeiros* by Fran Alonso, Francisco Souto e Miro Villar draws inspiration from the activity of whaling and its enterprising and hazardous nature, but turns it into an artistic quest for aspiring writers, one in which the whale becomes a metaphor for creativity in the oceans of the mind. In spite of the allegorical tenor of the hunting motif, an ecocritical perspective is likely to find such an approach disturbing in the present-day context of the endangered status of cetaceans. Another Galician poet, Xosé María Álvarez Cáccamo, turns to memories of whaling in Galicia, but swathes the motif of hunting in a dismal atmosphere of poverty, decadence and cowardice: “[...] e se escoita un rumor de superficie enferma, escurísimo brado de estómago animal, avisos de pobreza e laios vergoñentos” [... and one hears a whisper of sick surface, the darkest bellow of animal gut, warnings of poverty and shameful laments] (90). There is no room for the epic here, since this is the chronicle of a collective defeat.

Among the male poets, it is Estevo Creus who uses the whale motif with a recurrence, intensity and significance that is akin to that in women's poetry. The whale appears in the title of his collection *Balea2* as well as in most of its poems, but can also be found in previous collections, such as *Poemas da cidade oculta* and *Areados* [Sanded]. *Poemas da cidade oculta* —published a decade after the whale hunting moratorium— begins with a poem that is highly relevant to the posthumanist debate, as the poet presents a lyric subject that is inhabited by an

animal: “A min e non a ti / mordeume de neno unha balea / e no espiral do ADN/ mesturouseme a dolor con tres pasos e tres golpes” [I, and not you, / was bitten as a child by a whale / and in my DNA helix / pain was mixed up with three steps and three blows] (*Poemas* 10). Julian Savulescu, a specialist in bioethics, poses the question as to whether transgenesis, and the human-animal chimera in particular, can improve or endanger the human species (22). From a poetic point of view, we could answer that this type of transgenesis reveals an-other that we have inside us. Julia Kristeva suggests that if we acknowledge and accept the other we have inside us we will also be able to acknowledge and accept the other outside us (9). Transgenesis in this poem by Creus highlights the animal inside us, an animal that embodies the instinctive, imaginative and creative force of poetry. Transgenesis, I would like to suggest, entails the coexistence with the other, the contiguity of human and animal, and the instability of boundaries. As a trope, transgenesis favors a reflection upon identity and the relation with both the cultural and natural other. The motif of whale hunting also serves Creus to denounce the acculturation of Galician people. Far from the epic rhetoric of male heroism and defeat of the whale, Creus correlates the extinction of whales and the decimation of minoritized languages: “destrozarlle os ollos / quitarlle a canción / esquecer a lingua” [smash its eyes / steal the song / forget the language] (*Poemas* 63). Creus’s later collection, *Balea2*, interrogates the reduction of living beings to mere linguistic constructs and presents corporeality as the adamant manifestation of the real. Creus proposes a non-utilitarian and non-aestheticist contemplation of nature and denounces the spectacularization that turns natural beings into a commodity of showbusiness and of the capitalist delirium of unlimited growth: “tantas e tantas casas / construíron no areal / por ir ver nadar baleas / que xa non vén ningunha / que xa non / ven” [so

many and so many houses / were built on the sand strip / for the contemplation of whales / that no whale comes any longer / they no longer see] (*Balea* 2 38). He advocates the urgent need of putting ourselves in the place of the other, learning from the other, and breaking free of what he calls our “egosystem” (*Balea* 2 4). The whales’ problems become the problems of the poem’s subject in a manifestation of empathy that vindicates the ethics of care as an aesthetic principle.

3. The Whale in Irish Poetry: Beached Whales and Hospitable Bellies

We might perhaps begin this section with a reminder of the reasons for a comparative study of Galician and Irish poetry such as the present one. Given the gender focus of this article, the first notable feature to mention is the unprecedented rise of women writers in both communities since the 1980s thanks to the fertile ground prepared by feminist movements in the previous decade, and as a result of other social changes, such as women’s access to universities, which improved their learning and self-confidence. The conspicuous incorporation of women into the literary establishment certainly brought about changes in both literary systems regarding themes, tropes, subjectivities and forms, and revived debates about national, religious and gender identity (Palacios and González, Palacios and Lojo).

Regarding the relationship between literature and nature, there seems to be in Ireland a less anxious perception of the ecological crisis than the one we find in Galicia. Nevertheless, contemporary Irish poetry registers a growing concern with global warming, species endangerment and the deterioration of the landscape (Palacios and Nogueira). The motif of the whale in Irish poetry deserves comparative analysis due to the participation of Ireland and Galicia in the whaling industry —although the Irish involvement was of a smaller scale— and also for growing ecological concern with the endangered animal itself. Although the

figuration of the whale is less prominent in Irish writing, we find a number of examples of great evocative power and relevance to women's studies. I will thereby select for analysis those texts that best prompt a dialogue with the Galician poems discussed above.

In Doireann Ní Ghríofa's "Baleen", the lyric subject is a woman who recalls how, on the thirteenth anniversary of her birth, she changed her childhood clothes for adult attire. The description of the new clothes actually allows us to situate the poem in the nineteenth century, since one of the garments is the whalebone corset that used to be made with baleen —the keratin plates in whales' jaws which catch the fish or plankton as the whale feeds. Accordingly, this poem raises the topics of the female body, the whale, transgenesis, the belly, and feeding, apart from the important theme of homoerotic desire. Baleen, which allows the whale to feed, becomes, paradoxically, a second skeleton that constricts the woman's waist:

Now, each morning, a girl assembles my second skeleton
piece by piece, suspends it over my narrow person,
tightens the corset of whalebone that constricts
the curve of my ribs. (33)

The hunting of the marine mammal goes hand in hand with the oppression of the woman's body, and the figurative transgenesis consists here of the superimposing of skeletons. The poem also connects corporeality and homoeroticism —"I want her to touch my face" (33) — both potentially transgressive and, therefore, socially regulated. The rest of the poem includes other relevant issues, such as the beached whale, human puzzlement at the whale's strange behavior, the whale as a monster, woman's desire to enter the whale's belly, and the whale's belly as a hospitable *room of her own*. The beached whale is not a rare motif in Irish literature, and is

often accompanied by the expression of human perplexity as to the causes and consequences of this accident: “a whale beached in crumpled newsprint / men pointing, puzzling over how to dispose of it” (33). Since ancient times, beached whales were exploited when fresh, but in Ní Ghríofa’s poem the question is how to get rid of it. The expression “puzzle over” is pertinent to ecocriticism, as this field of inquiry considers nature to be a speaking subject that we humans either do not listen to or fail to understand (Murphy 12). However, the men in this poem are not wondering about the message conveyed by the stranded whale or the lesson that can be learnt from the situation; they simply want to remove the whale. The gender focus of this poem is important because it contrasts these men’s attitude with the female characters’ desire to enter the whale’s belly: “to roll into the monstrous mouth of a whale and twist / themselves through baleen and whale-spit” (33). The belly becomes a space of sorority —“dozens of ladies”, “we stood together” (33)— and a hospitable space to homoerotic desire. These women’s choice of the whale’s belly as a hospitable space may recall Emmanuel Lévinas’ association of woman, as Other, with the primary hospitable welcome (164-166). In an interesting shift of agency from the human to the animal, it is the whale that provides the convivial feminine space in this poem.

The motifs of the stranded whale and of nature as speaking subjects are also dealt with in “Pilots”, a poem from *The State of the Prisons* by the Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey set in Belfast Lough —presented here as a dystopic and severely polluted place. The disoriented whales enter this intertidal sea inlet while spectators gather to watch the phenomenon in puzzlement. The poetic persona implies that the whales have a message to communicate with their unusual behavior but that humans fail to understand it: “some dismal chorus of want and wistfulness /

resounding around the planet, alarmed and prophetic / with all the foresight we lack” (14). In contrast to other Galician poems with an allegorical understanding of the whale motif, Morrissey’s has a stronger ecological import, although her critique of the whale as a spectacle is comparable to that posed by Estevo Creus in his collection *Balea2*: “Children sighed when they dived, then clapped as they rose / again, Christ-like and shining, from the sea, though they could have been / dying out there” (Morrissey *The State* 15).

The stranded whale also features in Victoria Kennefick’s collection *White Whale*, which begins with the poem “Beached Whale”, in which the poetic persona’s childhood memory of a rotting whale on a beach is intertwined with the recollection of her mother crying on seeing her disfigured body in a mirror. Once again, we find in this poem the spectators’ awkward reaction to the beached whale: “and the mute open mouths of the many onlookers” (7), and over again we come across the theme of corporeality facilitated by the whale motif, and the identification of mother and whale as time disfigures their bodies: “the stale smell of a thousand tides”, “the scars of our arrivals barely healed after all this time” (7). The whale, whether as a trope or in reference to the real animal, is seen in the rest of the poems of this collection, yet one in particular, “White Whale”, is notable for its demystification of the *Moby Dick* heroic narrative. The poem is again about a childhood memory of the poetic persona, though this time it recalls the child’s visit, with her father, to the coastal town of Youghal, Co. Cork, where John Huston filmed his adaptation of Melville’s novel in 1954. The poem constitutes an anti-heroic account of the characters/actors and the setting/décor. Nothing is what it appears to be: the whale of the novel is now a camouflaged barge, the town of Bedford in Massachusetts is replaced by the Irish town of Youghal, etc.: “They

made-do with a barge concealed / by a hump, back, fin and tail. / The Captain hunted this for leagues” (25). This anti-heroic stance is probably one of the most salient characteristics of Irish women poets’ rewriting of the whale motif.

Herman Melville’s novel also receives significant reference in Caitríona O’Reilly’s collection *The Sea Cabinet*, where a quotation from *Moby Dick* features as the initial epigraph of the book. The blinding light of the Albino whale described in the novel is the motif chosen by O’Reilly to open her collection, while the poem “The Whale” certifies the animal’s extinction: “The whale on which their world depended // is elsewhere, free of history...” (44). The hunters have decimated the whale and with it the means of their own livelihood, so that whales and whaling are now mere exhibits in the Hull Maritime Museum in England. The poem thereby provides a poignant and incisive description of the museum exhibits in relation to the whale: myths, nomenclature, classifications of species, bones on display, recordings of whale songs, maps of whaling routes, hunting practices and commercial exploitation.

Though the motif of the whale is less conspicuous in contemporary Irish poetry than in its Galician counterpart, there is one particular poem by a male writer, Peter Sirr, about the ecosystem that is formed around the skeleton of a whale that lies on the ocean floor. “Whalefall” is included in the collection *Twenty Irish Poets Respond to Science in Twelve Lines* and its interest for ecocriticism lies in the attention paid to a natural medium of abyssal waters free from human interference, as well as in the impersonal tone that focuses exclusively on nature, regardless of the observer and his/her gender. However, in her analysis of the narrator’s impersonality in naturalist writing, Suzanne Clark argues that, as late as the 1970s, women could not access the “status of the disinterested” (155), as they were

considered to be the object of knowledge, and not its impersonal and objective subject. Therefore, the impersonal scrutiny of the whale in this poem raises questions about cultural constructions of the observer's gender.

4. Concluding remarks

In this analysis of the literary motif of the whale in contemporary Irish and Galician poetry, I have paid special attention to the dyad woman-whale as a compelling figuration for an emergent construction of female subjectivity. I have considered its potential for feminist self-affirmation, but have concurrently taken into account the ecocritical advocacy of nature as the central category of analysis. Androcentric exploitation and oppression of both women and nature have inadvertently generated hybrid figurations of women-whales that privilege the whale's belly as a hospitable space to foster alternative and subversive female subjectivities. However, I have contrasted allegorical readings of the trope of the whale as a sign of feminist empowerment with a more ecological concern for the decimation of the whale and the responsibility of the Irish and, above all, Galician whaling industries for this plundering of the natural world. The hybrid figuration of woman-whale reveals the mutual construction of human and non-human nature, their relation of contiguity and interdependence, and their relative, rather than radical and alienating, difference. This relation of an-otherness encompasses the needs and rights of both women and nature with more equitable discourses and practices.

Notes

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